

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH THOMAS MAHNKEN, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR POLICY PLANNING SUBJECT: UPDATES ON THE DEVELOPMENTS TO MINERVA MODERATOR: LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 4:30 P.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, JULY 10, 2008

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LT. CRAGG: Hello, I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday, July 10th. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg, with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating the call today.

A note to our bloggers on the line, please remember to clearly state your name, and blog or organization, and advance your question.

And next, today our guest is Dr. Thomas Mahnken. He's the deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Policy Planning.

Sir, I'm going to turn it over to you, if you want to open with any statement.

MR. MAHNKEN: No, just good afternoon to everybody. It's good to be with you, and happy to talk to you about the secretary's Minerva Initiative.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. With that, let's go ahead and go with the first blogger. It's Steven. Steven, if you want to go ahead.

Q Yeah, hi. Good afternoon, it's Steve Corman from COMOPS Journal. Thanks for taking the time to talk to us this afternoon.

I guess my question is, that we understand that you have signed a MOU with the National Science Foundation to extend the Minerva project into an NSF program. I was just wondering if you could tell us any more about that.

MR. MAHNKEN: Sure. I mean, first off, I'd be happy to refer you to, you know, to the NSF's press release on that. They have a press release on their, you know, on their website that talks about the memorandum of understanding. I guess what I would -- what I would add is that, you know, the Minerva initiative is an effort, you know, to build the Department of Defense's capacity in social science to reach out to the academic community in social science on topics of interest, you know, to national security both present and future.

It's a -- it's a project that has multiple strands. There was a -- the memorandum of understanding with the National Science Foundation being one; DOD Broad Agency Announcement being another; and I wouldn't -- you know, I wouldn't

rule out other strands as well, to include, to include workshops, seminars, and so forth.

Q Do you see the NSF program as being different from the one that came out on the BAA just recently, or fulfilling different role, or anything like that?

MR. MAHNKEN: Well, the NSF track is, you know, is, as I said, one of the -- you know, one of several tracks in Minerva. And the memorandum of understanding, you know, covers a number of, a number of areas.

It covers DOD funding of existing proposals that have come into NSF, provided that the, you know, investigators agree to that. It envisions the possibility of workshops; it envisions the possibility of solicitation for proposals; it includes, you know, a number of venues for DOD and NSF to work together in this area.

Q Okay, good. Thank you very much.

MR. MAHNKEN: Sure.

LT. CRAGG: Steven, did you have any other questions, or should I go on to Sharon?

Q Well, go on. If there's a little time left, we might come back around. Okay, Sharon, if you go ahead, please.

Q Sure. I was looking at some of the previous information you put out on -- or your office put out on how proposals will be funded. But some of the steps were unclear. Can you kind of go through on a granular level, you know, how will the peer review work? You know, who has final discretion over choosing and funding proposals? I mean, even if it's still in sort of the working stages, if you can give us an idea of how that will work from the time of proposal to -- (inaudible).

MR. MAHNKEN: Yeah, and I'm afraid that I'm -- if you're looking for a very granular level, I'm going to disappoint you because I'm, you know, I'm not working at that -- at that level of the -- of the program.

What I would say is that -- and here I believe you're talking about the DOD Broad Agency Announcement, correct?

(Electronic tone.) (Cell phone call was dropped.)

MR. MAHNKEN: Hello?

Q I think we lost her.

LT. CRAGG: Sharon? Okay, she'll come right back.

MR. MAHNKEN: Okay.

Q I can answer -- (laughs) since she's my co-writer, I'll ask --

MR. MAHNKEN: Sure, okay.

Q Yeah, in the BAA one of the questions that came up is, like, who exactly is going to fund, but -- you know, who's going to, who's going to fund the programs, how's the mechanism going to work?

MR. MAHNKEN: Well, in terms of who's -- who's going to fund it, I mean it's DOD --

Q No, no, I mean, who's going to make the funding decisions?

MR. MAHNKEN: Okay, the selection. There will be, there will be a selection board that will include academically, you know, qualified U.S. government employees, as well as -- potentially, folks from outside the government who, you know, who sign nondisclosure agreements. Obviously, we want to make sure that those who participate in the selection are not those who, you know, have submitted proposals. There has to be a -- have to avoid any sort of conflict of interest problem there. Q And, again just channeling Sharon here, I think the concern might be that, you know, you have the same guys that are, you know, doing source selection for, you know, computers or for weapons systems, you know, doing the same ones for social -- making selections for social science, and how would they know anything about --

MR. MAHNKEN: Yeah, well I think that's a -- that's a misplaced concern. I would say that -- as I said, that we're going to have people who have qualifications in the relevant fields, you know, again, who are either government employees -- and realize that the U.S. government includes, for example, you know, our professional military education institutions, it includes, you know, a lot of, a lot of folks, as well as, potentially, folks from outside the government who signed nondisclosure agreements.

You know, so I just -- you know, I have colleagues -- just thinking in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, I have colleagues who hold Ph.D.s and taught Middle East studies at Princeton; I have colleagues who studied jihadist movements and taught at Yale. You know, that's -- so, I think oftentimes behind -- you know, behind these questions is the assumption that the only academically qualified folks are in academia and everybody in government is unqualified. And that's not the case.

Q All right.

Okay, so can I now ask a question as myself (laughs) instead of channeling her.

LT. CRAGG: Who was -- some other people that joined us. I know that Sharon came on the line, but was there someone that joined the call?

Q Yeah, I got kicked off. I'm on a cell phone. So I've rejoined, that's probably what you heard.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, I don't know if there's anybody else.

Sharon, and then -- I don't know if you want to re-ask your question, but your colleague --

Q Yeah, I can -- (inaudible) -- I don't want to waste anyone's time, and I got the tail end of it.

LT. CRAGG: Okay.

Noah, let's go ahead and go with you -- go ahead, was there any questions?

Q Yeah, I guess my question is -- maybe even a little bit more basic, which is, I guess I'm a little confused how much of this is going to be, sort of, long-term, ongoing research that might be equivalent to, sort of, basic research in the hard sciences, and how much is going to be more applied, short-term research that, you know, would be, would be considered more applied research?

MR. MAHNKEN: That's an easy one. This is, this is basis research. It is long-term. I think if you, if you see the provisions laid out in the BAA, we're talking about, you know, making awards up to, you know, five years for an initial award, and, you know, and a follow-on award.

Again, the secretary's vision is to really, you know, build capacity within -- you know, within academia, within, ultimately, you know, the U.S. government to tackle these very important issues. And those are -- you know, building capacity is not something you do overnight, and it's something you do through basic research. Q Yeah. And so the idea is -- maybe is not to have the same kind of, sort of, hard split between the social sciences and the military that you did after Vietnam?

MR. MAHNKEN: No, that's exactly right. I think the secretary -- particularly, you know, coming from his previous job as president of Texas A&M, you know, realizes that there are, you know, there are some relationships between parts of academia and, you know, parts of the government that could be strengthened. And this program is a part of that effort.

Q Okay, thanks.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, let's go back. If you want to go with Steven. Steven, did you have any follow-on questions?

Q No. Honestly, I can't think of any. I think the BAA spells it out pretty well. (Laughs.)

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Anybody else on the line that have any follow-on questions?

Q I do, actually. I was wondering if you could talk about, what do you see as the desirable end-state? You know, if this goes well, you know, projecting out 10 years, I mean -- you know, I guess the closest comparison we have is sort of Sovietology, Kremlinology which was something that Secretary Gates referred to in his speech.

So when you look out at academia, how do you envision both the ties that you would like to have and the types of department skill set, knowledge set that would come out of this?

MR. MAHNKEN: Sure. I --

Q -- (inaudible)

MR. MAHNKEN: Yeah, I know, and I think -- I think you've -- you know, you've really hit the nail on the head, because the vision that, you know,

Secretary Gates put forward in his AAU speech really is a long-term one. And I guess what I would -- what I would do is contrast the situation, you know, today with, you know, what would be desirable in the future.

And I'll -- here I'll just speak for, you know, for OSD policy, you know, the policy arm of OSD. And, you know, as we think about the really bright folks that we recruit into policy -- we recruit a lot of political scientists and folks in international relations; we recruit, you know, a sprinkling of historians, a smattering of economists; and we have some folks who have -- well, we have a lot of folks who have foreign language skills, but we have only a handful of folks who have foreign language skills in particularly difficult languages, such as Mandarin Chinese and Arabic. And so, you know, one way to think about the desirable outcome is that, yeah, 10 years from now we have a much more diverse workforce, in terms of disciplinary backgrounds. We have a workforce that is use to, you know, thinking about a whole range of issues -- that I certainly didn't get a chance to think about when I was in graduate school. And that we have -- and that that workforce inside the government is informed by, and connected to, a vibrant discussion, and research and debate in academia on those same issues.

And I think -- you know, you talked about the analogy back to, back to the Cold War. I'm not saying we're headed to a new Cold War. Certainly, Secretary Gates isn't saying that. But that type of, you know, discussion and debate, which formerly we had about the, you know, the former Soviet Union, I guess is that type of thing that he is looking -- he is looking at for, again, a whole range of new challenges.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you.

Sharon, does that answer your question? Do you have any more follow-on?

Q I don't have any right now. I might. (Laughs.)

LT. CRAGG: Okay.

Noah or Steven, any other questions?

Q Yes, I do. How much visibility is this whole -- this isn't a full question, this is the starter -- how much visibility do you have into the Human Terrain program?

MR. MAHNKEN: Very little at all. It's not -- it's not in my area.

Q Got it. And so this, in no way, is meant to be backfill for replacement of -- or, you know, sort of, future training ground for Human Terrain or Human Terrain -- (inaudible) --?

MR. MAHNKEN: No, the two -- the two are -- you know, are two separate programs with two distinct purposes. You know, I think the only -- the only thing that they have in common is the recognition that, you know, that we could do a better job understanding and interacting with other societies and cultures.

Minerva is, you know, Minerva's focus is on basic research and developing the skills, you know, in academia, and the insight in academia that we, that we need to understand other cultures for a whole variety of purposes. Again, I'll let others speak to, you know, human terrain

Q And, you know, I was speaking to some academics today who are still very concerned about historical examples in which social science, that maybe was carried out for the military, was then used for, you know, for purposes other than it was, it was intended. And so I wonder if there -- is there any mechanism in place to, sort of, keep this research from becoming twisted in some way, or to allay academic concerns that it might be twisted to something -- I don't know, more nefarious?

MR. MAHNKEN: Well, I guess -- I guess to do that I would need to hear a scenario where, you know, basic research in any of these areas -- over the course of years, that's really intended, you know, to build capacity, could somehow be twisted to, you know, to another purpose.

I mean, I think it's in the nature of any of these areas, that they -- that it really is, you know, that it, that it's long-term basic research.

Q Well, I mean, for example,, you know, there was field research done in Thailand, which eventually fed into the CORDS program during the Vietnam era, which fed into Operation Phoenix, which, you know, did targeted assassinations. You know, and the people working on that original Thai research had no idea that one was going to lead to the other to lead to the other.

And, while that may seem far-fetched today, I know that many in academia still share those concerns.

MR. MAHNKEN: Sure. Well, and -- you know, again, I can't see -- I can't see a similar case arising. And, again, I would ask you to look at the topics that are, you know, that are laid out there, that they're, you know, they are not, you know, that they are not of the nature -- that gets back to the earlier question of a basic versus applied research. I mean, these are really basic, you know, research questions. And I think we can all, you know -- certainly folks can identify some nefarious, you know, some nefarious motive. I would say to those people, you know, that nobody's twisting their arm to apply for any of these -- any of these grants. And I think there is always a tendency -- or often a tendency for, you know, for those outside of government to ascribe motivations to folks inside government that just don't apply.

Q Sure. Sure.

Q I have a follow-up question --

LT. CRAGG: Go ahead.

Q -- for the first time. I think in the last conference call I asked, you know, why DOD? Why not National Science Foundation? And your answer, which made perfect sense was, you know -- well, I mean, it's not just National Science Foundation why not other parts of government? Why should DOD be the one? And your answer was, well, other parts of government weren't really doing this research, so, you know, DOD steps in.

But I think to follow-on on that, do you have any concerns -- and I want to be careful how I word this because I'm not saying this is my position, but inevitably when DOD goes into an area -- and it tends to have a lot of funds, it moves the direction of research, which is not necessarily a good or bad thing, I mean, you can see this in computer science, and aerospace engineering and parts of physics.

So I guess when it comes to the social sciences, is there any concern that basically DOD funding will fundamentally change the direction that some of these areas go in? But, I don't know if that question makes any sense, but --

MR. MAHNKEN: No, I mean, it makes sense, but I -- you know, first off, I wouldn't, I wouldn't pin that on the Department of Defense. I would say that -- I would say that, you know, that, you know, research, you know, research dollars, wherever they come from, affects, you know, affects what people -- or what some people study. And certainly I, you know, I would think every philanthropist certainly counts on that effect in putting their private dollars, you know, to work sponsoring research. Every, you know, charitable foundation that sponsors research certainly hopes that they're going to affect the research agenda. I think that is just the, you know, that is the nature of, you know, of research funding. It's not confined to the, you know, to the Defense Department.

You know, so I would say, you know, to -- you know, to any foundations, to any philanthropists, the same, the same things apply.

LT. CRAGG: Okay.

MR. MAHNKEN: And what I -- you know, what I would say in this case is, that we have selected topics that are important, you know, that the secretary feels are important to national security, to fund them. And I would say, as a taxpaying citizen, that that's perfectly fine for us to do, just as it's perfectly fine for MacArthur Foundation to fund research for George Soros; to found (sic) research for Bill Gates to fund research.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you.

Okay, with that, we have about 10 more minutes. So, if anybody has any follow-on questions before we go with closing remarks?

Q Sure. I got one more.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, go ahead.

Q There's a lot of Defense Department money already being spent to do, sort of, social, cultural, behavioral modeling -- computer modeling. Do you see Minerva getting into that field as well through the BAA, or through something else?

MR. MAHNKEN: Well, you know, what I would say is, first off, that, you know, we'll, you know, that the review panels will review the proposals that come in and we'll choose the meritorious proposal. So, I certainly wouldn't want to prejudice, you know, what anybody would, you know, would want to submit in response to the BAA.

I think the BAA speaks for itself in terms of, you know, what it's -- what it's looking for. And, you know, we'll take the best proposals.

Q Okay, so it could include that kind of modeling work, or it could not?

MR. MAHNKEN: It could. I could not. You know, I think -- I think what I would say is -- certainly in the BAA language, I think it's pretty

explicit there -- that we're looking much, you know, broader than just, than just modeling. Q Mm-hmm. (In acknowledgement.) And to include field work, perhaps?

MR. MAHNKEN: Again, I would, you know, I would tell people to, you know, to put in their proposals. You know, I think since we have an open solicitation, I don't think it's proper of me to say, you know, what's in bounds and out of bounds. I think anybody -- any offer needs to refer to the BAA and, you know, make their judgment there.

LT. CRAGG: Okay --

Q I do have one more follow-up --

LT. CRAGG: Go ahead. Keep on going.

Q -- and that is, just as a practical matter, are you confident that your -- (all ?) are going to be able to get the reviews done and the awards made before you turn into pumpkins? And, along those lines, is that -- is there any chance that the incoming administration might reel the awards back in, or something like that?

MR. MAHNKEN: Well, we're -- we're certainly committed to, you know, to getting the awards made by the end of this calendar year. You know, that's -- that's our commitment. We certainly have timelines in place that will allow that to happen.

As to the next administration, I wouldn't presume to tell them -- you know, to tell them what to do. I would say, however, that, you know, the topics that Secretary Gates has outlined are ones of, you know, enduring -- or should be ones of enduring interest to the Defense Department and the nation, and leave it at that.

Q Okay. But, you couldn't rule out them not following through with the awards, or --?

MR. MAHNKEN: That's really beyond my competence. I mean, that gets -- that would get into the details of the contract, you know the grants administration and everything like that. And I'm not the right person to ask about that.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Any last minute questions? We have about seven minutes.

Okay, with that, sir, if you want to close with any closing thoughts?

MR. MAHNKEN: Sure. No, I appreciate your, you know, your interest in Minerva, as you see, it is kind of a growing, a growing program. You know, the secretary certainly sees this as an important initiative for the Department and, indeed, for the country. And, you know, I take your interest in this, in this program as kind of a -- as a validation of that, and I look forward to your continued interest and attention as the program moves forward. Thank you very much.

Q Thank you.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

And with that, today's program will be available on the bloggers link on dod.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with the source documents, such as the bio, audio file and print transcripts.

Again, thank you, sir, for participating, and that concludes today's events.

MR. MAHNKEN: Happy to do it. Bye-bye.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

Q Bye-bye.

END.